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Latin America

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This publication is prepared for regional specialists in the Washington community by the Latin America Division, Office of Regional and Political Analysis, with occasional contributions from other offices within the Directorate of Intelligence. Comments and queries are welcome. They should be directed to the authors of the individual articles.

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Latin America: Reaction to US Human Rights Policy

The US policy on human rights has aroused deep resentment among Latin American nations. Some, like Brazil, have demonstrated their strong displeasure; others, like Argentina, are attempting to mute their anger at a policy they believe is being selectively applied.

The Latin governments that have come in for the most serious scrutiny have denounced US pressure as an intolerable interference in what they consider strictly an internal affair. Five countries--Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Guatemala, and El Salvador--have highlighted their annoyance by rejecting US military assistance because of aid cuts imposed by Washington or because the aid was tied to their record on human rights. Resentment could lead many Latin countries to turn increasingly to other sources of military supplies including the USSR.

Whether US human rights policy will have any positive effect remains to be seen. At least one government, the Chilean junta, has taken an even tougher line against domestic political dissent. Most Latin governments have at some time had to cope with active insurgency; the Argentine junta is still battling the virulent Montonero faction. Area leaders are determined not to abandon the tactics they believe essential to cope with terrorism or prevent its recurrence. At least some Latin Americans find the US policy unsettling; many believe authoritarian regimes are the only deterrent to political and economic chaos in their countries. Only Venezuela has publicly praised the US for its stand on human rights.

US policy seems to be contributing to the tendency of Latin governments--especially in South America--to draw together in response to shared problems and common perceptions of the outside world. Virtually all the governments affected by US action have endorsed each other's defiance of Washington. Some of the South Americans are reportedly looking into ways to coordinate their opposition. They are said to be considering urging all Latin

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presidents to reject US military aid and refuse to participate with the US Navy in the annual training exercise "Operation Unitas."

US leverage on the human rights issue is now limited. The Latins not only remain firm in their belief that their tactics are completely justified, but are determined to avoid actions that could be construed as "knuckling under" to US pressure. All hope the US will mute its call for human rights improvements and allow a "cooling off" period. It is conceivable that some of the area's governments will eventually alter their policies, but only when they perceive that their internal situations warrant improvement and certainly not while there is a danger of appearing to respond directly to Washington's wishes. NR

Argentina, on the other hand, though seriously disturbed, has tended to minimize its reaction and seems determined to contain the rights issue. The Argentines swiftly rejected all further US military assistance once Washington announced aid cuts but did so without the belligerence that marked the Brazilian rejection. Argentine officials have made clear that they hope the rights problem will not affect bilateral concerns. Nonetheless, they have indicated that they will continue those practices they deem indispensable to combat leftist terrorists, whatever outside criticism they incur. NR

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